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Challenges and Prospects of Political Liberalization in Egypt

The Arab world is changing. Confronted with increasingly disenchanted domestic populations and Western efforts to promote democracy in the region, a representative number of Arab governments has embarked on the road to political reforms or has accelerated the pace of their realization. Changing regional conditions in the three years have helped to create an unprecedented momentum for debating the perspectives of democratic transformation from Morocco to Bahrain. Never before has Arab public interest in political participation, peaceful transfer of power, and good governance been as genuine and far-reaching.

Yet, the path to Arab democracy continues to be problematic. A close look at the contemporary regional political scene reveals that the predominantly missing element—when compared with more successful experiences of political transformation elsewhere (e.g., Eastern Europe and South America)—is the emergence of democratic opposition movements with broad constituencies that can contest authoritarian power and force concessions. International efforts to promote democracy in societies where the tradeoffs of undemocratic governance continue to be bearable for the ruling elites do not suffice to make political reforms plausible or viable.

Government Reform Policies

Contemporary political developments in Egypt confirm these doubts. They shed light on two major dilemmas of Egyptian politics: the tortuous path of the government in initiating needed democratic reforms and the structural weakness of opposition parties and movements. Since 2002, Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) has embarked on an effort to project a new, reformist image. Rising domestic demands for political accountability, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, and popular dissatisfaction with the performance of NDP-led governments have forced the party to reconsider its public profile. A greater inclination on the part of the United States and the European Union to pressure Egypt on political reform has also played a role. In the past three years, a cadre of younger technocrats—mainly mid-career professionals, businessmen, and university professors—has been injected into a party long dominated by older figures. This "young guard," well versed in the rhetoric of democracy and good governance, has developed the NDP's current platform of political reforms. The NDP has

also revamped its internal structure by introducing primaries for leadership posts, creating specialized policy committees, and convening an annual congress.

Throughout the last three years the NDP has articulated different reform initiatives tackling the crucial issues of citizen participation and their political rights. Although NDP draft laws on "Exercising Political Rights" (Law No. 73 of 1956) and "Political Parties" (Law No. 40 of 1977) represent attempts to open up the political system, they stop short of creating momentum for democratization in Egypt. President Hosni Mubarak's recent decision to amend article 76 of the constitution to allow more than one candidate to run in the upcoming presidential election next fall certainly represents a significant reform step, but there is real danger that it will be robbed of all meaning if it is not followed by other substantial reforms or in case of a practice based on the model used in Tunisia, where President Ben Ali carefully staged the inevitable extension of his period in office along pluralist lines.

The Egyptian government has ignored the wide consensus that exists outside its own constituency concerning the three reform imperatives needed to render Egypt's democratic transformation a realistic project: (1) setting limits on the terms of office as well as the powers vested in the president as head of the executive, (2) rescinding the State of Emergency, which was extended by the People's Assembly on February 23, 2003, for three more years, and (3) changing the laws obstructing the functioning of professional associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The State of Emergency limits the ability of political and civic groups to associate and assemble freely. Political parties, when legalized, are highly restricted in their activities. The Emergency Law prohibits parties from organizing public meetings without prior permission from the Ministry of Interior. Security forces have unrestrained powers to arrest and detain individuals, a practice particularly common in the case of Islamist groups whose members are normally arrested prior to parliamentary and local elections. The legal framework for NGOs in Egypt is governed by Law No. 84 of 2002, which requires civic associations to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and opens the possibility of political manipulation by granting the Ministry the right to disband by administrative decree any association deemed to be performing illegal activities. Furthermore, the law prohibits NGOs from taking part in political or syndicate activities and receiving crucial foreign funding in the absence of governmental approval. In all these areas, no traces of substantial transformation can be discerned since 2002.

Almost three decades ago Egypt appeared to embark on the road to democracy. Since then the government has favored a more gradual transformation to a limited political pluralism. The major legitimizing strategy for the government's go-slow approach has been twofold: (1) systematically evoke the well-worn mantra that economic reforms must come before political reform, and (2) consistently maintain that the population needs to be prepared for democracy before reforms can take place. But, the "democratization in spurts" model has led to no more than minor reforms on the fringes of the political sphere. The system of power relationships and constitutional and legal arrangements organizing political participation remains essentially unchanged.

Opposition Movements

The second major dilemma of Egypt's democratic transformation is the absence of democratic opposition movements with broad constituencies. Although the party system is fundamentally established and shows a moderate degree of fragmentation, the NDP dominates it with its strong hold over the legislative and the executive branches. The four major opposition parties—the liberal Al Wafd Party, the leftist National Progressive Unionist Party, the Arab Nasserist Party, and the Al Ghad Party—are structurally weak and lack constituencies large enough to mobilize popular support. Ten other small parties are active, but their numbers and political relevance are inconsequential.

In contrast, there are approximately 16,000 registered civic associations. Even by regional standards, however, the diversified topography of vital social interests is still underrepresented; the poor, the weak, the marginalized, and the rural constituencies are excluded from the system. In the 1950s and 1960s the state functioned as the major representative of these groups, but since the Open Door Policy began in 1976, the state has been retreating from various social spheres with no viable substitutes to fill the vacuum. Representation of interests has become a monopoly of powerful political and economic elites—a dangerous situation considering that the exclusion of large segments of the Egyptian population has always resulted in social unrest, radical currents, and political apathy. Civil society groups encounter both state restrictions and popular distrust. Through an efficient conglomerate of legal and political measures, the state controls the scope and content of activities performed by civic organizations. They tend to remain centered in urban areas and oriented toward the middle class.

By contrast, nonviolent Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood are well rooted in the Egyptian social and cultural fabric and possess great potential for forging broad alliances for political transformation. In the 1980s and 1990s the Muslim Brothers had yet to come up with a strategic commitment to democratic forms of governance. Caught in the iron grip of state oppression and continuous radicalization at the outer edges of the Islamist spectrum, they were forced out of the official political sphere. Their preoccupation with rhetorically sound, though politically unattainable, issues—such as the implementation of the Islamic Law and the Islamization of educational systems—did not help them overcome general doubts about their real objectives. Rather, it lent credibility to the negative perception of Islamists as traditionalist forces who are less interested in tolerating the diversity of Egyptian society or accommodating political pluralism in any serious way. By the end of the 1990s, despite considerable popular support, the apparent failure of Islamists to change political realities in Egypt gave birth to various revisionist trends among nonviolent movements and unleashed a critical discussion on their priorities and strategies that gathered momentum in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

The major outcome has been a shift in mainstream Egyptian Islamist movements toward more pragmatism based on prioritizing gradual democratic reforms as the path to follow for their political integration and as the only viable strategy to challenge a persistently authoritarian system. Embracing the notion of democratic polity within nonviolent

Islamist movements, however, does not mean that they are giving up their religious legacy and becoming wholeheartedly the new liberals of Egypt. Rather, they will always sustain their distinct religious identity as compared to other political forces by stressing, at least rhetorically, a traditional agenda built around moral calls to implement the Islamic Law and Islamize the public sphere and propagandistic pleas to liberate Palestine and the Muslim homelands from the "infidels." The crucial issue at stake is the fact that calling for democratic reform is becoming a central component of the Islamist agenda as well, if not its determining principle, one which transcends all others.

The realization of the new Islamist vision requires a degree of openness on the part of the Egyptian government toward the integration of nonviolent movements in the political sphere. Unfortunately, no steps have been taken in that direction. The Muslim Brotherhood remains excluded from the political sphere and faces at virtually regular intervals the repressive measures of the government. Islamist-led initiatives to establish political parties (e.g., al-Wasat initiative) are normally blocked by the government-controlled Political Parties Affairs Committee. Despite their continued containment and exclusion in the last few years, democratic Islamists have upheld their strategic choice for gradual political reforms.

Throughout the last three years, different secular parties have been gradually reaching out to mainstream Islamists and engaging them in campaigns calling for reforms. Islamists, for their part, have seized the integration opportunity and positioned themselves at the heart of the growing popular opposition. The Egyptian Movement for Change, Kifaya (Enough), stands for this emerging secular-religious national alliance for democracy. These are significant initial steps. Democratic opposition platforms are by far more effective with Islamist participation than without it.

Promoting Political Reform in Egypt

Egypt's path to democracy is uncertain. The government's reform policies in the last three years have gone in the right direction, but they stop short of introducing a package of substantial changes into the political power structure and the restrictive patterns of political participation prevailing in the country. Apparently, the only way to end the current stalemate is to mobilize large constituencies for political reform. Opposition parties and civil society actors, however, face restrictions imposed by the government and suffer from various structural deficiencies. Nonviolent Islamists have the potential to reach out to considerable constituencies, but they are suppressed by the government's security forces and have rather limited room for maneuver.

Egypt is so geostrategically important that it can neither be ignored nor subjected to pressures. The United States can help promote reform by encouraging the government to move ahead in opening up the political system and easing its restrictions against the opposition, especially nonviolent Islamist movements. To this end, the United States should use its strong economic and political ties with Egypt, without alienating the government by threatening to cut down military and economic assistance. Managing the

reform process, primarily in its first stages, remains the prerogative of the existing regime and without its backing the whole process cannot take off.

A second viable strategy is to promote the cause of emerging democratic platforms and engage nonviolent Islamists. The United States needs to deepen its current openness toward Islamist movements by gradually including them in democracy promotion programs. Without their active participation, calls for reform in Egypt are bound to remain the whisper of closed communities irrelevant to the social fabric at large. In a first phase of collaboration it might be easier for both the United States and Islamist movements to set aside the explosive terrains of national and regional politics and adopt a low-profile approach. Different joint projects designed to promote mutual trust and moderation within the Islamist spectrum can be envisaged for example in the fields of civic education, empowerment of women, and local capacity building. Identifying potential Islamist partners should follow a minimalist, more pragmatic and less normative, approach. The respective movement or organization becomes eligible, provided that it clearly and generally renounces violence and is willing to collaborate with the West. The Egyptian government has long secured the support or at least the silent approval of the United States for its repressive measures toward Islamist movements by evoking the so-called Algerian syndrome or the nightmare of anti-Western fanatics coming to power through the ballot box. However, at present excluding Islamists from the political sphere weakens the chances of democratic transformation in Egypt more than anything else. The cause of democracy is best served by bringing in nonviolent Islamists and their large constituencies.